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## REVIEWS

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### STANDARDS IN ENGLISH EXPRESSION

Standards in English tend to be either mechanically formal or irritatingly and futilely vague. The former tendency was made painfully familiar by the "language" books and formal grammars in use up to the close of the third quarter of the nineteenth century and was succeeded by the era of "freedom of expression." It has become increasingly apparent as time has passed that mere babbling does not of itself grow better, but there has been little clear light as to how definite requirements might be set up without enthroning once more his honor the gerund grinder. A highly valuable service has been performed, therefore, by Superintendent Sheridan and Principal Mahoney in the publication of two small volumes which represent serious attempts to work out standards and effective procedure in oral and written composition for the schools of Lawrence and Cambridge, Massachusetts, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

These two volumes should be considered together both, because they have the same plan and purpose and because the authors assisted each other in carrying on the work which made their publication possible. In general, the purpose may be said to be to set forth a sound theory of teaching composition to children in the elementary school and to provide definite goals to be striven for at each stage of progress through the grades. In Mr. Sheridan's words the purpose of his course of study is

(1) To replace vague, uncertain, and sometimes too ambitious aims with a purpose clearly defined and reasonably possible of achievement.

(2) To prescribe limits within which the elementary work in language is to be confined.

(3) To emphasize the teaching of oral language, both for its own sake and for its value as a foundation and preparation for written language, and to formulate a systematic and progressive plan of teaching this most important and much neglected side of English composition.

(4) To construct tentative standards of achievement for each of the eight elementary grades, in both oral and written language, which it seems reasonable to expect the majority of pupils to reach.

<sup>1</sup>*Speaking and Writing English.* By Bernard M. Sheridan. Chicago: B. H. Sanborn & Co., 1917; *Standards in English.* By John J. Mahoney. Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book Co., 1917.

We should teach, the writer continues, a smaller number of things more thoroughly. What these should be may be learned by studying everyday language needs and the latent capacities for expression possessed by the ordinary boy and girl. The specific aims of the course are:

1. To turn out pupils able to stand before the class and talk for a minute or two upon a subject within the range of their knowledge or experience, speaking plainly, in clean-cut sentences, and without common grammatical mistakes.
2. To turn out pupils able to write with fair facility an original paragraph upon a subject within the range of their experience or interests.

The methods which must be followed to attain such aims as these are set forth with much force and good sense by both our authors. Mr. Mahoney adds the very interesting and valuable feature of a running account of how the teachers of Cambridge collaborated with him in formulating both aims and methods and in selecting material for drill and composition standards for the various grades. He also adds to the suggestions for teaching composition some lists of selections for literary study.

Neither writer professes to have employed such a measure as the Hillegas Scale. In general, the sample compositions seem to have been chosen merely as fairly typical of what may be expected in each of the various grades. In this respect a collection of compositions recently published by the Board of Education of Detroit presents an interesting comparison. The compositions were collected by Miss Clara Beverly, supervisor of English, and were scored by her with the assistance of Mr. S. R. Courtis and his colleagues in the department of research. All the readers trained themselves in the use of the Hillegas Scale, and their ratings are shown in comparative tables. There is also a set of compositions which have been rated by means of this scale so as to form a scale for compositions of younger children (the Hillegas Scale being composed mainly of pieces by high-school pupils and by adults).

All such attempts are clearly in the right direction. The report of the Council Committee on Articulation, of which Mr. Noyes was chairman, showed how pressing is the need for simpler and more precise aims. If Mr. Sheridan and Mr. Mahoney appear to anyone to have gone too far when they limit written composition by children strictly to brief paragraphs, let such remember that up to the present no school system has been able to demonstrate that it is possible for any but the more favored few, who have extraordinary capacity, to do more. The plan set forth provides that each pupil shall have all the freedom of expression which he is able to use.

J. F. H.